

Managing Grazing Lucerne

Animal health

WHAT: **Bloat** is not likely in sheep, however it can occur when lucerne is fast growing and leafy, especially during spring.

ACTION: if you are concerned about bloat: provide constant supply of cereal hay; use set stocking rate; and graze flowering or more mature stands to reduce the risk.

WHAT: **Pulpy kidney** or enterotoxaemia may cause animal losses on lucerne as on many other high quality feeds or grain supplements.

ACTION: vaccinate.

WHAT: **Reproductive disorders** due to high levels of coumestrol (plant oestrogen) due to fungal foliar disease (also from insect damage, virus infection and poor plant nutrition). Can reduce ovulation and delay oestrus in ewes.

ACTION: graze wethers or joined ewes on diseased/stressed lucerne. Join ewes on healthy lucerne or alternate pasture.

WHAT: **Red gut**, a minor problem, may occur when grazing lush lucerne stands in winter/spring.

ACTION: Supply roughage e.g. cereal hay, or give stock access to a grassy paddock continually or at least once every three or four days.

WHAT: **Pizzle rot** (bacterial posthitis) is more prevalent when wethers graze lucerne because of the higher nitrogen content in the urine compared to normal annual pasture.

ACTION: monitor; isolate infected animals; reduce protein of feed; treat infected animals (seek veterinary advice).

Lucerne survival

WHAT: grazing **young lucerne**.

ACTION: wait until lucerne flowers before grazing.

WHAT: grazing **established lucerne**.

ACTION: alternate periods of grazing with a period of recovery. Root energy reserves are highest at full flower and lowest 2-3 weeks after grazing. High temperatures and moisture stress reduce accumulation of root reserves. Continuous grazing causes rapid decline in plant numbers. Continuous removal of shoots depletes root reserves.

WHAT: to achieve **rapid regrowth** and lucerne **persistence**.

ACTION: preserve basal buds and some leaf; remove stock when lucerne is 5 cm high.

WHAT: to achieve optimum sheep **production** combined with lucerne **persistence**.

ACTION: spell paddocks for 5-6 weeks (until stand reaches 10% flowering); graze for 1-3 weeks depending on seasonal conditions; subdivide large paddocks for more uniform grazing; be flexible depending on seasonal conditions.

WHAT: to achieve high sheep production or stocking rates are high or rainfall is low or erratic.

ACTION: subdivide large paddocks.